CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies News

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From the Dean's Desk

"Academically Speaking"

One of the frequent pleasures of being the Dean of Graduate Studies of this university is the chairing of Ph.D. thesis defences. Not only do I have the opportunity to renew my links with many of Concordia's and other universities' best scholars who serve on examining committees, but I am also witnessing the steady rise in the level of academic excellence of our best students.

Recently I also participated, for the second time, in the selection of the winner of the *prix d'excellence* of the Chambre de commerce de Montréal for 1989, and I was able to place the quality of our own doctoral candidates within the larger context of doctoral thesis evaluations at all Montreal universities and affiliated schools.

I was struck by the fact that our understanding of what constitutes an academically outstanding thesis transcends local boundaries, and that both academic and non-academic members of selection juries share values and objectives that ensure rational discussions about the criteria for academic excellence.

In the case of the *prix d'excellence* selection committee, the non-academic members of the jury were professionals from business with a background in engineering and commerce. As in the case of last year's jury, I was impressed once again by the ability of leading members of the business community to bring a level of cultural and scholarly appreciation to the selection process that results in an objective and fair choice.

The Concordia academic community itself has a strong professional component, in engineering, commerce, and fine arts. As a university community we are therefore accustomed to the on-going process of self-reflection required to come to grips with the multiple meanings of the word 'academic' and idea of academic excellence in the broader context.

Over the next few months, the Graduate Studies News will feature interviews with my fellow deans: Dr. Steven Appelbaum, Dean of the Faculty of Commerce and Administration, Dr. Charles Bertrand, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science, Dr. Robert Parker, Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, and Dr. M. N. S. Swamy, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science. As their presentations unfold, it will become clear that all faculties aim for excellence in their various disciplines, but that this term has a variety of equally valid meanings.

In a recent convocation address, our rector, Dr. Patrick Kenniff, observed that one of the virtues of universities is their remarkable capacity for coping with internal contradictions. Our editorial objective for this academic year is to present that kaleidoscope of values that is loosely referred to as 'academic excellence'. In addition to presenting interviews with senior administrators, we will publish articles by doctoral candidates on their work.

M. E. Szabo
Dean

Reconstructing Moral Education –

Steve R. Hreha

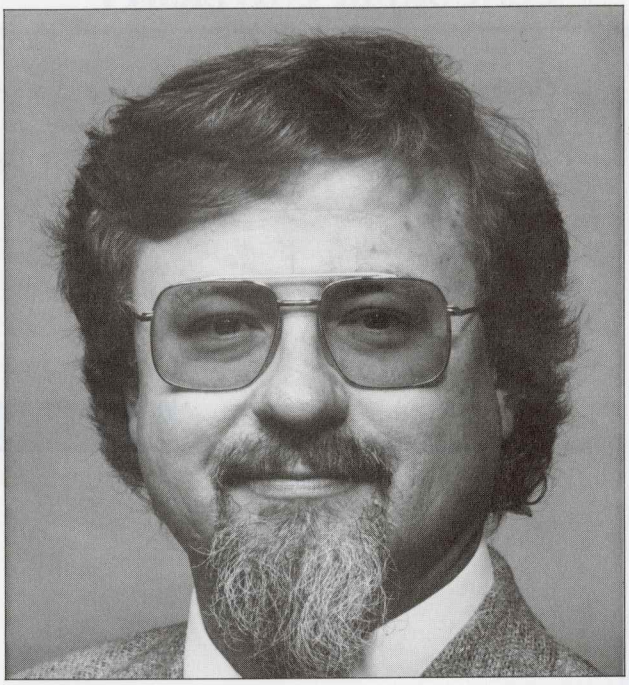
Moral education is of some concern to most everyone. General interest in moral education, however, does not imply consensus. The specific values and ideals comprising the subject matter of moral education, the classroom practices associated with it, and its underlying philosophical assumptions are the object of intense public scrutiny and debate. Moreover, since secular and religious views of the nature and purpose of morality are deeply incompatible, these controversies often prove to be intensely partisan and intractable.

The principal aim of moral education, it can be argued, is to foster the growth and development of moral agency. The idea of a moral agent thus can be seen as informing the theory and practice of moral education. The notion of a moral agent can be construed, in purely formal terms, as denoting an individual who: 1) can recognize when to engage in moral reflection, 2) is capable of engaging in such reflection, and 3) is able to act (as a general rule) in accordance with the judgements eventuating from such reflection. This understanding of moral agency, however, must be fleshed-out within the parameters of a particular moral framework if it is to inform moral education.

Assessing competing moral frameworks within which an understanding of moral agency can be delineated need not proceed from the assumption that only one moral framework can be correct. A more reasonable approach would be to consider the commonplaces of moral life with a view to determining the characteristic features peculiar to the context of moral reflection. On the basis of these features, the adequacy of competing moral frameworks (and their attendance conceptions of moral agency) could then be assessed.

Two commonplaces of moral life are worthy of special attention. The first is that regardless of the moral system a person actually adopts, it is clear that, apart from the interactions of a particular agent and the world within which her/his life unfolds, there would be little or no moral life. The agent thus involved, however, is not only a thinking being, but also a being who feels and imagines, remembers and learns from past experience, has needs and wants, espouses principles, experiences emotions, is moved by impulse and constrained by habit. Thus the function of a moral framework is to inform the agent's thinking, feeling, deliberating, valuing, choosing, doing and acting as these occur throughout the entire spectrum of interactive situations comprising the whole of her/his life.

The second feature characteristic of moral life is that the moral framework adopted by a particular agent is neither self-explanatory nor self-applying. It is the agent who must undertake to acquire as complete and as deep an understanding of the principles comprised as s/he is capable of achieving. It is also the agent who not only must recognize when to invoke these principles, but also must develop skill and sensitivity in applying them. It is the agent, therefore, who is the locus of moral life and hence its quality is as much conditioned by her/his character as by the moral framework espoused.



Steve R. Hreha

In light of these commonplaces of moral life, a particular approach to moral education can be assessed by considering the moral framework connected with it together with the notion of moral agency which this framework engenders. Apart from the moral education programs reflecting a particular religious tradition, two competing approaches to moral education are currently in place in public schools in both Quebec and Ontario. The first of these is the values clarification approach developed by Sidney Simon, Louis Raths and Merrill Harmin. The second approach was developed by the late Lawrence Kohlberg. Values clarification stresses the personal nature of values and the valuing process, while Kolberg's approach underscores the central role of cognitive development in moral growth.

Both of the current approaches to moral education in the public school system are inadequate. The values clarification approach breaks down not only because of its insidious moral relativism but also, and more importantly, because it fails to devote sufficient attention to the reflective and deliberative dimension of moral experience. The character that values clarification presupposes and fosters is thus seriously deficient. Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental approach is no better since it altogether ignores the vital and dynamic role of the agent's affective character in conditioning the structure and quality of moral experience. Approaches to moral education that presuppose particular religious traditions are also unsatisfactory since they devalue the agent's autonomy by substituting authority and obedience for inquiry and experience. Given the need for a program of moral education on the one hand, and the inadequacy of currently available approaches on the other, what is to be done?

A Deweyan conception of moral experience, in my view, provides the necessary framework within which an approach to moral education can be developed. The principal features of Dewey's view that make it an interesting alternative to the moral frameworks informing the approaches cited above can be summarized as follows:

1) it construes moral experience as a interactive process involving an agent and her/his natural and socio-cultural environment, 2) the agent involved in moral experience is conceived as a biological being capable of thinking, feeling and acting and whose whole character contributes to determining the quality of moral experience, 3) inquiry and deliberation is understood to be context-sensitive, and 4) value is viewed as a construction conditioned by agent-centered and environment-centered forces and energies.

Adopting a Deweyan conception of moral experience as the framework within which to develop an approach to moral education would result in several significant consequences for the theory and practice of moral education. Three of these in particular must be mentioned. The first, and perhaps most important, is that the role of the agent's affective character in conditioning the quality of moral experience would receive considerably more attention that is presently accorded to it. In so doing, it would open the door to feminist thinking about moral experience. The second consequence is that moral education would be viewed as involving the development of the agent's whole character within the context of a liberal arts curriculum. Thirdly, the agent's sensitivity to the context-dependent variables characteristic of moral life would be emphasized.

A Deweyan approach to moral education is, in my view, a clear and philosophically important alternative not only to the programs developed by Simon and Kohlberg, but also to approaches that are rooted in religious tradition. From a Deweyan perspective, the principal aim of moral education would be to foster the growth and development of moral agents who are sensitive to the challenges and dilemmas of men and women living in a post-industrial and technological society characterized by cultural pluralism. Anything less would leave us ill-prepared for the future.

Steve Hreha is a graduate of the Ph.D. in Humanities program and recently defended his thesis entitled, Moral Education and Moral Agency: A Deweyan Approach. He teaches philosophy and humanities at Champlain Regional College.

Anne Bennett – Master's in Computer Science

Winning awards and scholarships comes naturally to Anne Bennett. She has just been awarded her fifth NSERC (National Science and Engineering Research Council) scholarship, in addition to numerous other awards for academic and athletic achievement. Her chosen field of study at Concordia is computer science and she is presently writing her master's thesis.

She completed her undergraduate studies at Bishop's University, majoring in chemistry and minoring in computer science. "My two great interests coming out of CEGEP were chemistry and theatre," says Bennett.

She was awarded her first NSERC in her first year of university and it enabled her to work in the chemistry lab at Bishop's, only to discover that she wished to pursue other academic interests. "I found chemistry dangerous; one slip could cost you your health, and it took so long to get results," she explains.

Anne Bennett

Her next NSERC grant the following summer allowed her to pursue both her interest in chemistry and computer science. She worked for the Department of Mechanical Engineering at l'Université de Sherbrooke, writing a tutorial program for a materials engineering course, putting her chemistry background to good use for the work on heat treatment of steel.

The next summer (again as an NSERC recipient) she worked for a high-tech computer firm writing software to digitize fonts. Her work involved computers that read into its memory an outline that an operator would trace out on a digitizing tablet. The program then displayed this hand-traced shape on the screen and allowed the user to edit it as desired.

It was during this period that Bennett began to seriously consider graduate studies in computer science but first she decided to pursue her love of theatre, and enrolled in the theatre design program at John Abbott College. She completed the first two years of the program, and says, "If I ever have the time and money, I'd love to go back and finish the last year—there's really nothing like it."

Concordia was her first choice for graduate studies because she had heard good things about the program from former students, and she is pleased that Concordia is such a community-oriented institution. Going to class means mixing with people of all ages and backgrounds.

Her first year of master's studies in computer science involved general coursework and the necessary prerequisites not completed as an undergraduate student. In her second year she chose Dr. Peter Grogono as her advisor. His research interests include programming lan-

guage design, exploring existing languages, analyzing why some are more functional than others. Then general sets of rules are defined to describe what makes a language useful in various ways. Reasonable trade-offs have to be found between conflicting requirements like portability and efficiency. In computer terms, portability means that a language can run under different 'platforms', or operating systems like MS-DOS or Unix. Efficiency usually means that the final program code is as compact as possible in terms of memory usage.

Bennett feels fortunate to have an advisor who takes a strong interest in her work and who has been able to provide her with experience in a newly-developing field. Her own thesis deals with programming code modularity and the flow of information between these modules. Human beings can only deal with small parcels of information at one time, whether it is speech or text. In the same way, programmers want to deal with manageable modules that together make up a complete program. Her thesis will look at the criteria used for modularity, the relationships between modules, and how they communicate.

Bennett is also interested in the relatively new concept of 'object oriented programming', where a program has certain variables, or 'objects', of various types. There are several OOPs packages already on the market, the best known being Smalltalk, but "right now they're just a group of interesting ideas with no underlying theory", she states.

Although her demanding academic program does not leave much time for extra-curricular activity, Bennett found time to sit on the Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science's committee on the status of women and would like to see more women recruited to this field in the future.

After her master's degree is completed, Bennett intends to work in computer science in the area of programming language design. She has already received several offers for Ph.D. scholarships, including still another NSERC.

Upcoming Doctoral Examinations

Candidate: Louise Brisson, Dept. of Biology/Special Individual Program
Thesis Title: Immunological Localization of Plant Secondary Metabolites
Examination: Tuesday, October 10, 1989 at 2:00 p.m. in Room H-762

Candidate: Atluri Rama Prasad, Dept. of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Thesis Title: SMR Topologies with Advanced Waveshaping Features
Examination: Thursday, October 26, 1989 at 10:00 a.m. in Room H-769

Candidate: Elspeth Probyn, Faculty of Arts & Science/Special Individual Program
Thesis Title: An Autobiographical Turn: Uses of the Self in Cultural Theory
Examination: Friday, October 27, 1989 at 2:00 p.m. in Room H-769

Candidate: Ishmael David Ordonez, Dept. of Chemistry
Thesis Title: Synthesis, Dark Electrochemistry and Photoelectrochemistry of Tetrasulfonated Metallophthalocyanines in an Ion-Exchange Polymer Blend
Examination: Monday, November 6, 1989 at 2:00 p.m. in Room H-773

All the above examinations will take place in the Hall Building, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West, Montreal.

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